Review of Recycling reconsidered: the present failure and future promise of environmental action in the United States by Samantha MacBride

Recycling Reconsidered. The Present Failure and Future Promise of Environmental Action in the United States; MIT Press: Cambridge, MA & London; by Samantha MacBride; 2012; ISBN 9780262016001; £18.95 hardback

The symbolic nature of the unwanted and discarded by-products of the social organization of people have long been recognized ever since British social anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) enticingly suggested “dirt as matter out of place” (p. 36). It is all the more surprising then to still find pockets of social science reluctant to fully engage with waste and its disposal as issues of central concern to societies. Fortunately human geography and environmental sociology are two social science sub-disciplines that have embraced waste and its disposal as social problems requiring remedy. It is within this context that Samantha MacBride’s new book *Recycling Reconsidered* emerges, which represents both a timely and important scholarly attempt to draw our attention to the less than glamorous aspects of the production-consumption cycle that tends to receive much less attention than it perhaps deserves.

The aim of MacBride’s book is to turn a critical eye on recycling as a ubiquitous environmental behaviour that most people – in developed societies at least – take for granted and who usually assume is a good thing to happen. In doing so, she shows us that despite advances since the 1970s in recycling performance in the United States (US), the goals of recycling have not been met because the majority of waste continues to either be burnt or buried in the ground. This failure is attributed to the success of the manufacturing sector intentionally preventing alternative, but more

sustainable, forms of waste management from being implemented. More controversially, she also argues that the green social movement has been complicit in this because it is engaged in activities that seek to convince individuals of their responsibilities to lead more sustainable lifestyles and produce 'zero' waste. In pointing out where the process of recycling has failed to deliver on its promises, MacBride offers an alternative vision based on ecological citizenship. This is taken to mean "the range of options, strategies, actions, and communications that people concerned about resource depletion, pollution, ecosystemic disruption, health risks, and inequality globally and locally should feel free to engage in" (p.218), which is framed in terms of sustainability and environmental justice debates.

MacBride's methods of study combined longitudinal statistical data on waste quality and quantity with socially constructed data on how waste is being expressed in public discourse and public policy. For both strands of research a variety of data published by primary sources were collected and analysed. These included: newspapers and trade journals, reports from government and non-government agencies, the archives of grassroots organisations, and legislation at various governance levels. The tools of investigation should therefore impress even the most discerning of research methods enthusiast.

The substantive material is presented in five empirical chapters, which MacBride skilfully uses to illustrate the "tensions and struggle around solid-waste problems, involving groups in industry, civil society, and government" (p.15). With each chapter forming a historical case study, we are taken on a journey through the contradictions

inherent in US materials policy. This includes exploring the paradoxes of different categories of waste; examining the clashes of different policy instruments; unravelling the disparity between a focus on households at the expenses of manufacturers; and the contemporary tendency to frame recycling at the community scale. The book is concluded with a number of concrete recommendations that focus on the role of government in collecting accurate data on waste arising across sectors; the need for more deliberate regulation and specific urban-waste policies; and an appeal for the public to embrace composting because of its transformative potential to reshape the relationship between humanity and planet.

So does it achieve? Leaning toward the normative, the text can at times come across as overly optimistic. This is surprising given the lengths the author goes to in explaining how the manufacturing sector has prevented a more sustainable and effective waste management system from being implemented. As a result, the calls for a greening of capitalism through implementing national-scale policies based on ecological modernisation as developed in Europe in the 1990s are less convincing. More persuasive is the part of the conclusion reserved for making the case for an ecological citizenship that emphasizes a greater role for governance through information, regulation and industrial policy which to date has been “overshadowed and crowded out by other progressive expressions” (p.219). This includes changing material-lifestyle practice; establishing business and social enterprises; looking to design solution; or educating current and future generations with moralistic messages, which have to varying degrees already been shown by other scholars to be have limited success.

While some readers might find the text to be densely written, on the whole MacBride's book is excellent. The breadth and depth of data and arguments made appear sound and – for this reader at least – it was refreshing to come across robust empirical social science research making sensible suggestions for how social change might be achieved in an important and often overlooked field.

Reference

Douglas, M. (1966) "Purity and Danger. An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo". London: Routledge & Kegan Paul